**Phonics alone won't do: pedagogy**

[Shaw, Michael](http://search.proquest.com.ezp01.library.qut.edu.au/indexinglinkhandler/sng/author/Shaw%2C%2BMichael/%24N?accountid=13380). [The Times Educational Supplement](http://search.proquest.com.ezp01.library.qut.edu.au/pubidlinkhandler/sng/pubtitle/The%2BTimes%2BEducational%2BSupplement/%24N/30534?accountid=13380)[4962](http://search.proquest.com.ezp01.library.qut.edu.au/indexingvolumeissuelinkhandler/30534/The%2BTimes%2BEducational%2BSupplement/02011Y10Y07%2423Oct%2B7%2C%2B2011%243b%2B%2B%24284962%2429/%24N/4962?accountid=13380) (Oct 7, 2011): 3.

Ask British education ministers what is needed to help children read better and you usually get a simple answer: "More phonics." For several years the method has been treated as a magic bullet. It has become the knee-jerk reaction to any of the recurring public panics about childhood illiteracy.

Of course phonics is crucial. If children cannot learn to turn the symbols on the page into sounds, they cannot read. It should be the foundation of literacy, and if children struggle with it they need all the support that can be provided.

But phonics is not the whole answer. Once a small child has mastered that decoding stage - as all but a few do - they are only at the beginning. There is still much to be done to turn them into fluent readers who can properly understand the sentences in front of them.

The report Teaching Reading in Europe is a timely guide about where teachers need to focus more attention if they want pupils to reach the next level (pages 4-7). Phonics is important, but the researchers found it was already widespread in the UK and elsewhere.

Where the work was really needed was in comprehension, helping pupils make sense of what they read. Perhaps surprisingly, that work was not just required in primary schools, but also in secondaries. Without comprehension, pupils cannot get to the important next stage: reading for pleasure.

George W Bush famously said: "You teach a child to read, and he or her will be able to pass a literacy test." It was not just his clumsy grammar that made the quote amusing, but the stunted ambition. We are used to grander claims about how reading can open doors to new worlds, and allow us to see through each other's eyes.

Yet Bush's comment was prescient, in a way. Over the past decade, schools have got better and better at helping pupils pass literacy tests. They will no doubt get used to helping them pass the planned phonics tests, too.

In contrast, the proportion of young people who read for pleasure has fallen. That is not all the education system's fault - the competition for children's attention outside of schools has grown.

Yet it underlines how important it is to ensure that all pupils get the chance not just to read sentences out, but to understand them. The evidence from Europe shows we can do it - but the answer is no longer just "more phonics".

Michael Shaw is editor of TESpro

michael.shaw@tes.co.uk @mrmichaelshaw.

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